

## Remembering Vinod Raina—Life and Times

Contemporary Education Dialogue

11(2) 251–256

© 2014 Education Dialogue Trust

SAGE Publications

Los Angeles, London,

New Delhi, Singapore,

Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/0973184914529041

<http://ced.sagepub.com>

**Kamal Mahendroo**



On 12 September 2013, Vinod finally gave up the struggle. It became inevitable as the malignancy accelerated, devastating his body. About a month earlier, when we convinced him to come to the Delhi State Cancer Institute in East Delhi for treatment, we were hopeful. Our hope stemmed from long years of knowing Vinod for his ability to look for solutions in challenging circumstances systematically and with positive determination.

The outpouring of tributes and personal reminiscences from far and wide surprised even those who thought they knew him well. His outreach to a wide variety of people across a host of issues has been impressive. He leaves behind a rich legacy of thought and engagement.

As the emotional shock of his passing away recedes, it becomes important to examine his legacy to understand how it came about and what part of it continues to be alive and relevant. Was it the creation of an extraordinary mortal? Or was it the result of the unflagging effort and commitment of an ordinary mortal?

From our student days at Delhi University's Physics Department, where he was my senior by a couple of years, to Kishore Bharti, then to Eklavya and beyond, we evolved at times together, and at other times agreed to disagree and went our separate ways. There were occasions when we ran into each other to compare notes and ideas, share our joys and frustrations, debate and analyse the issues that interested us, enjoy music and food cooked by him, and swap stories about our travel experiences. At this juncture, apart from nostalgia, there is a rich array of memories of over forty years to recall and share.

The early 1970s was a heady time to be at Delhi University. A bunch of students and faculty members got together to design and propose an

alternative curriculum for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in physics. It became a platform for expressing our dissatisfaction with outdated course content, the total disconnect between the teaching of theory and practicals, and a very compartmentalised, cut-and-dried view of science and physics. Vinod was one of the senior students leading the effort.

Some of us were naturally swept along by this audacious attempt to challenge the establishment and to press for sweeping changes. More than just an angry uprising, it was an involved exercise to understand issues of curriculum design and develop an alternative model of physics education. The resultant proposal of reform was an irreverent challenge thrown at the establishment committed to ossified practice of dead habits. Nothing much came of the effort, and the dissent was effortlessly absorbed while the 'trouble makers' were identified for future retribution.

A pleasant side effect was that it brought us close to a small group of our teachers who had actively participated in the effort and inspired us. A shared realisation emerged that the problem began much earlier in school. It sparked interest and led to forays into school science education. In this fertile situation, in 1972, arrived Anil Sadgopal and Sudarshan Kapoor, and their organisations, Kishore Bharti and Friends Rural Centre Rasulia, with an invitation to work in rural schools in Hoshangabad district in Madhya Pradesh. They provided the ignition that some of us were looking for. Led by our favourite teachers from the Physics and Chemistry Departments, we became actively involved as student volunteers of the Delhi University Science Teaching Group.

In 1973, the group became formally involved in the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Programme (HSTP), with support from the University Grants Commission. An overnight train journey from Delhi to Hoshangabad would transport us into a different world. The natural beauty of the Narmada River and its valley, fringed on the north and south by the forested hills of the Vindhyas and the Satpuras, was both exhilarating and soothing. Life on the Rasulia and Kishore Bharti campuses was refreshingly simple, with ample opportunities for various innovations and experiments. In addition, we were all overwhelmed by the personal welcome and warmth of the people there.

Confronted by the reality of schools in rural areas, and of life in villages, something that was difficult to imagine for those living in Delhi, it seemed to us at first that making a difference would not be very difficult.

It did not take us very long to realise that the dynamics of the situation were much more complex. A simple village teacher wanting to teach well was up against enormous odds, as was a rural child seeking an education of decent quality. The complexity of the challenge, rather than dispiriting us, excited us then, and continues to do so even today.

Visiting schools in villages, conducting training sessions in the day, holding late-night sessions of analysis, intensive debates, and report writing while sitting around a fire or on stools around a table, interspersing our discussions with songs by the more gifted members of the group (Vinod being one)—this was our idea of utopia. Engaging in a challenging and creative discourse while linking it to actual practice on the ground fired our imaginations. No-holds-barred debates respecting no hierarchies exceeded our rebellious expectations. The depth and breadth of intellectual engagement demanded was stimulating. Vinod and many of us came under the spell of this new way of doing things, and we were gradually convinced that this was what we really wanted to do in life. Returning to Delhi after every trip would bring us back rudely to our existential realities.

Anil and Sudarshan had a dream to sell—a dream of transforming society through education and development while working with the deprived in rural areas. They were looking for full-time volunteers. As students we faced a dilemma. On the one hand was their inspiring example of giving up conventional careers in state or corporate organisations and setting up new kinds of institutions. On the other hand was the role model of our university teachers who straddled both the worlds of teaching and research and voluntary service.

In 1975, Sadhna Saxena and I took the foolhardy decision (never to regret it) and moved to Kishore Bharti. Meanwhile, the group of Hoshangabad volunteers, including Vinod, carried on with their research studies at the university. For us, every visit to the Delhi University campus was like visiting home. In the Physics Department, or at the Coffee House, or in Vinod's Gwyer Hall room, we found an eager audience to pour out our experiences and frustrations, and share our new ideas and plans.

This was also the period of the JP Movement (with its idealism) and the Emergency (with its anger and despair), followed by the post-Emergency period (with its euphoria). Kishore Bharti became a stop for a host of activists from various groups across the country. Vinod

and others on their frequent visits were also pulled into these interactions. At the same time, the pressure to complete their thesis submissions was also mounting.

Vinod's academic and social life in Delhi University was equally hectic. Apart from his research interests, he found time to pursue his interest in music. Playing bridge was a passion. He was a key organiser of the university film club, Celluloid. And, above all this, he was very active at the University Computer Centre, which had a huge IBM 360 at that time. As a result, he got a faculty position in the newly set up Department of Computer Sciences. Seeing the later exponential growth in computer sciences, it is easy to imagine what a coveted post it was. And yet neither Vinod nor we gave up the hope of his shifting to Hoshangabad at some point in the future.

The breakthrough came in 1978 with the expansion of HSTP to the entire district. The first training with over 300 teachers at the Narmada Mahavidyalaya campus in Hoshangabad, proved to be a milestone. It demonstrated the potential of scaling up an innovative programme. With active official support from the highest levels, a very fruitful partnership between the state and non-state groups like ours seemed feasible. We found eager partners and supporters among members of the state and central bureaucracy. The idea of setting up a new institution was seeded.

It took four more years for Eklavya to be initiated. Vinod was an active member of the founding group, steering through the ups and downs of the process of putting together a team, getting individuals to commit, envisioning and chalking out an appealing proposal, negotiating with various state agencies for financial and other institutional support, and overseeing the handing over of the HSTP from Kishore Bharti to Eklavya.

In October 1982, the Eklavya Foundation came formally into being. Various team members shifted to field centre locations. Vinod packed up his Gwyer Hall residence and shifted to Bhopal to set up the Coordination Office and his one-room residence in the city. These few words cannot capture the dilemmas and uncertainties that haunt such decisions. Vinod was being tempted by offers of further studies in computer sciences in the USA, but ultimately Eklavya's pull proved to be stronger.

Vinod's achievements in the following years deserve much more than a passing mention, but space here does not permit that. The major challenge

was taking the HSTP forward. Also, Eklavya had to evolve its own new programmes and produce its own publications. Vinod played a crucial role in most of these activities. But even more challenging was facilitating all these activities within an organisational structure that was firmly rooted in decentralised democracy and collective leadership. Vinod gave his best to make these ideas work, both through tireless efforts and intense confrontations at the level of ideas and analyses as well as implementation and practice. At one point, he decided to move on to trying out new forms of organisational structures, new programmes, and new scales of operations.

We were not always in agreement. It was not easy to accept that a particular stage of an experiment had yielded the best results that it could and that it was time to move on. What to move on to also would be an issue of intense analysis. The challenge of creating a new vision, and hence new programmes, is always daunting and fills one with self-doubt. As we look back, we realise that Vinod made us confront a number of such situations. One may not agree with the options he exercised, but even the process of choosing a particular course of action and committing oneself to certain kinds of action and theory is a significant step forward. More importantly, it guards against too much analysis leading to paralysis.

Vinod's legacy is spread across a number of fields—children's magazine, science and technology news, science teaching, science popularisation, people's science, literacy and literacy campaigns, the rights discourse, universalisation of quality education, climate change and much more.

Vinod had a way of involving and dealing with the state. But this also meant that he ran the risk of being accused of seeking to fulfil his personal ambition and of always being active in the corridors of power. It also points to a very fundamental contradiction faced by activists in relating to the state. We are convinced that the state should be responsible for ensuring basic rights like education for all citizens and that it cannot abdicate this duty to private interests. We are equally acutely aware of the nature of the state and its inefficiency and limitations as far as commitment to inclusion, equality, and fairness for all is concerned. So should we keep challenging the state with our criticism and demands, or should we collaborate with it to achieve our goals? This existential dilemma is faced by activists of all kinds, and Vinod made his choices, some of which we may agree with and some with which we may not.

It is time to celebrate a life richly lived. But it would be unfair to Vinod if in celebrating his legacy we were to put aside the tradition of intense critical discourse and debate. Theoretical debates can move forward only when examined through the lens of implied action and experiment. Vinod's legacy can live through such active engagement only, even if it differs from what he believed and wrote.

Choosing not to opt for chemotherapy and instead try out other medicinal systems to prevent metastasis was one such option. He lived an active life during this three-year phase. Finally, when he did submit himself for chemotherapy, it was too late. Many of us regretted that he did not share his decision to delay chemotherapy with us. But we also appreciate that it is decisions such as these that take scientific knowledge forward. Vinod's commitment to this method of science may not have been perfect, but it is a legacy worth taking forward.